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COMINT: Who We Are & What We Propose

We are a group of concerned citizens and media professionals who enjoy public television but are concerned about its failure to provide balanced and responsibly reported programming in the area of current affairs documentaries and series specials.

Ours is not a blanket indictment or complaint. Thus we share the view that Ken Burns' recent *Civil War* series is one of the great achievements of television programming by any standard. The *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* is also, we think, a model of responsible reporting and news analysis. In addition, *Frontline's* recent segment "The Struggle For South Africa" was an eye-opening report on the trials and perils of the post-apartheid future which

may hang. Governmentally funded, publicly privileged institutions like PBS and the stations it serves cannot be the captive of one political sub-culture and expect to survive in the long run. Political or cultural bias will eventually provoke the kind of government attention that is inimical to the independent role of the media in a free society. Even in the absence of governmental concern about political bias and cultural exclusion, good old competition for audience will take its inevitable toll. Already, culturally enriched programming is available on cable stations like A&E, Discovery and Bravo, which do not pander to the tastes of one political and cultural minority in the unseemly manner of public television. Remedies

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become a curiosity in itself. For example, instead of recognizing that the contras eventually became the largest peasant army in Latin American history, *Frontline* characterized the contra war in the extreme terms of the radical left as "a CIA war against the people of Nicaragua." This in 1990 — that is to say, *after* Nicaraguans had clearly rejected the Sandinistas in a landslide election that brought to power exactly those forces in Nicaragua that the

aired on PBS nearly ten years ago), but it is not even balanced as between the mainstream and its leftist fringe. Thus PBS documentaries on America's role in the cold war invariably establish their perspectives well to the left of the Democratic Party Administrations that have helped to architect that policy. Lewis Lapham's *American Century* series (of which "Imperial Masquerade" is one episode) damns Republican and Democratic Administrations alike



Sandinistas and their US supporters had previously condemned as "contras" and "contra-sympathizers." In short, whatever else it was, Ronald Reagan's war



from the vantage of the radical left. Similarly, a recent six part series on The Korean War was written by Jon Halliday, an editor of *New Left Review*,

Pictures vs. Talking Heads

Conservatives are not the only viewers of public TV with concerns about programming. Liberals and leftists have complained as well. Some of the more extreme complaints from the left are frivolous, as for example FAIR's charge that *MacNeil/Lehrer News-Hour* is biased because it interviews too many white males and not enough Marxists as newsmakers or

The rationale here is not so clear...It would be reasonable, for example, for PBS to consider balancing "Wall Street Week" with a show about employment opportunities in a similar format.

news analysts. But some of the complaints have merit and reflect, from the other side, the kind of confusion in standards that now reigns over public television's programming in current affairs. Thus, the complaint is heard that William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* and John McLaughlin's *One-on-One* are not balanced with similar programs from the other side of the political spectrum. Fair enough. Why not have two liberals as entertaining and informative as Buckley and McLaughlin host similar shows? It is also said that *Wall Street Week* is a conservative advocacy program. But even though the show's host, Louis Rukeyser is a well-known conservative, the

policy show, but with a show about employment opportunities in similar format.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

But another case is also made — and made frequently by PBS programmers resisting proposals to balance their current affairs programming. This is the claim that Buckley and McLaughlin (who appear in minimally viewed time-slots on Saturday afternoons) together with William Rukeyser of *Wall Street Week* sufficiently balance hours and hours of left-leaning prime time documentaries and filmed specials like *The Africans*, *The Secret Government*, *The American Century*, *The Korean War*, "High Crimes and Misdemeanors," and series like *POV* and *Frontline*. Unlike the conservatives' talking heads programs (which are somewhat balanced by series like *Bill Moyers' World of Ideas*), the programs in the area of near leftist monopoly reconstruct entire historical realities and wind up on video-cassettes to be distributed, often with companion books, to libraries and schools. By no stretch of any reasonable imagination can the tiny contingent of conservative talking head shows balance the legions of panoramic "documentaries" and "investigative reports" that at-



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litical organizations and the press in the spring of 1990. At that time, COMINT asked Kulczycki if he was indeed reviewing the case of "South Africa Now." Kulczycki said he was. In September, COMINT followed this up with a letter to Kulczycki in which 9 proposals were presented to KCET manage-

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ment designed "to correct the present bias in KCET programming." These included establishing a policy of balance and fairness, hiring an ombudsman to enforce the policy, refusing to air PBS programs that failed to conform to the policy, etc. The fourth proposal referred to "South Africa Now":

4. Terminate the blatantly propagandistic "news" show "South Africa Now" or re-label it "commentary" and balance it with a show on South Africa from the right.

On October 2, Kulczycki replied negatively to 8 of the 9 proposals. His reply to proposal 4 was as follows:

We began broadcasting "South Africa Now" some two years ago while the South African government was censoring all press reports out of that country. Since the censorship restrictions have been lifted, we have continued to run the series, but we have been looking very carefully at the particular editorial stance of the program in relation to our standards for journalism and fairness. We will be making a decision about the continuation of that series on KCET very soon.

The decision was announced two weeks later. COMINT first learned of it from LA Times reporter Sharon Bernstein, who was writing the story and wanted a response.

It is clear from this sequence of events that two of the most powerful public television stations in America, after thoughtful and careful review, and following appropriate station guidelines and procedures, concluded that the show "South Africa Now" did not meet the stations' standards for "journalism and fairness" and decided to terminate it. This decision, which took nearly a year to make, was reversed within a week because of political pressure from outside forces.

But the story also has a sequel. On December 14, 1990 the Committee on Media Integrity filed a petition
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These excuses remind us of a famous episode from the dark days of the cold war. During the Stalin period, a visitor to Russia asked a Soviet official why they had not published E.H. Carr's *History of the Bolshevik Revolution* in the Soviet Union. The reply: "We have a paper shortage."

Evidently PBS has a film shortage. This, despite the millions of public dollars that PBS stations expend every year on the production of documentaries like "Black Power, Black Panthers", a promotional film for that violent political gang of the 1960s produced by KQED San Francisco. Lack of material is an inadequate excuse for a situation that seems, rather, to reflect the political bias of public television programmers in the area of current affairs documentaries. Does there exist sufficient material for a more balanced program schedule to be aired in the area of current affairs and contemporary history? One has only to turn to PBS's cable competitors, A&E, Bravo and Discovery to see that there does.

In fact the present skew in public television's documentary programming on current affairs may get worse before it gets better. Recently independent television producers won a battle to create The Independent Television Service and secure the allocation of \$6 million in funds from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Congress for documentary programming. Yet, the make up of the new organi-

Whatever else it was, Ronald Reagan's war against the Sandinistas was not a war "against the people of Nicaragua" by any reasonably objective standard.

zation does not inspire optimism. As one PBS station manager said to COMINT, "The Independent Television Service is under the control of people so far to the left that they make the people at POV look moderate."

The situation that now exists in PBS documentary programming on current affairs subjects is intolerable to a large section of public television's audience, illegal under its Congressional mandate, and detrimental to its broadcasting future. But it can be rectified. Most important for any reform would be the readiness of public television executives and producers to recognize the existing responsibilities and obligations they have under their authorizing legislation, and to act on them as soon as possible. Our experience, however, has convinced us that this will not happen without institutional changes. Some key proposals for such change are outlined in our editorial in this issue.

Our Quarrel With KCET

In December 1990, COMINT formally petitioned the FCC to deny public television station KCET unconditional renewal of its broadcast license. We did so only after a year of frustrating dialogue with KCET management, during which we came to the reluctant conclusion that the top-heavy institutional structure of KCET insulates management from the community that supports it. This has led to an arrogant attitude that is itself an impediment to KCET's ability to serve the public, as its mandate instructs.

Unlike its sister station KQED-San Francisco whose members elect their board of directors, KCET appoints its board. And it is a large board. Its 53 individuals form a group that is too unwieldy and too beholden to function as responsible trustees of the public interest. Board meetings at KCET are of

such a policy and if so, whom? Etc. We received no answer to these questions then, and have received none to date.

In the same meeting we pointed out that KCET had failed to announce its board committee meetings in advance and that these meetings did not appear to be open to the public, both of which violated the Public Broadcasting Act. We asked if KCET intended to correct this policy in the future. Again, we were stonewalled. So we appealed to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the govern-

Did KCET have a formal policy for establishing fairness and balance in its programs? And if so, what was it?

PBS Chills Warming Debate

These are strange days at the Public Broadcasting Service. PBS recently turned down a British documentary so thorough in its scrutiny of the so-called "greenhouse effect" that the London *Financial Times* called it "quite possibly the best science documentary of the year." Instead, PBS chose to air a program which claims that the Roman Empire fell because of cold weather, that Thomas Alva Edison wreaked ecological havoc by inventing the light bulb, and that half of the world's rain forests will be deserts by 1994. Both documentaries were about global warming. What's going on?

Historical...or Hysterical?

While providing air time for a more hysterical than historical production like "After The Warming," PBS turned down "The Greenhouse Conspiracy" on the grounds that it was "too one-sided." Shown to British viewers in early August, "The Greenhouse Conspiracy," a 55-minute British documentary, succeeded in convincing then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to temper her enthusiasm for greenhouse treaties.

While PBS turned down hard science, it served up science fiction. "After The Warming" a two-hour PBS special, is a good specimen of the prevailing orthodoxy in public television. While half-baked theories of global climate catastrophe are regularly touted on PBS, more responsible views are silenced.

By Richard Minitier — Reprinted from *UpDate*, newsletter of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, December 1990 Number 12.

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tion with the FCC to deny KCET an unconditional renewal of its license (see *Our Quarrel with KCET* — page 7). Four days later, KCET announced that it would label all future segments of "South Africa Now" "Point of View" commentary, just as COMINT had suggested. In announcing the decision, KCET President William Kobin said:

Because "South Africa Now" does not consistently meet KCET standards for fairness and balance in news programming, the station will identify it on the air as a 'point of view' program as long as we feel such identification is appropriate.

We at COMINT consider this a double vindication, both in respect to our criticism of the show "South Africa Now", and in respect to our year long effort to get KCET management to begin to articulate a policy of "fairness and balance" in its current affairs programming.

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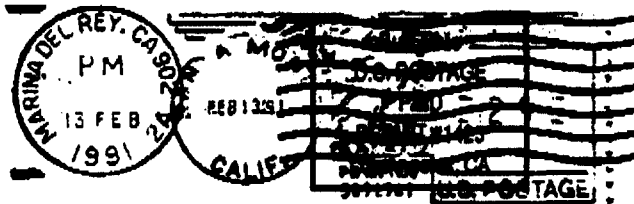
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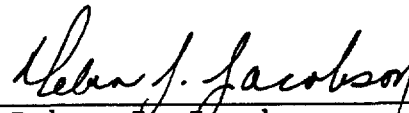
CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Debra J. Jacobson, hereby certify that I have on this 27th day of March, 1991, caused copies of the foregoing "Opposition of Community Television of Southern California to Informal Objections" to be served by first-class U.S. mail, postage prepaid, upon the following:

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